

Between today and yesterday

Davis, Francis

DOI:

[10.5040/9780567677747.ch-032](https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567677747.ch-032)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY-NC)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Davis, F 2019, Between today and yesterday: evidence, complexity, poverty and the 'body' of Christ. in S Walton & H Swithinbank (eds), *Poverty in the early Church and today: a conversation*. T & T Clark, London , pp. 206.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567677747.ch-032>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Davis, Francis. "Between Today and Yesterday: Evidence, Complexity, Poverty and the 'Body' of Christ." *Poverty in the Early Church and Today: A Conversation*. Ed. Walton Steve and Swithinbank Hannah. London: T&T Clark, 2019. 206–215. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 27 Jan. 2020. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567677747.ch-032>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 27 January 2020, 10:38 UTC.

Access provided by: University of Birmingham

Copyright © Steve Walton, Hannah Swithinbank and contributors 2019. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher.

Between Today and Yesterday: Evidence, Complexity, Poverty and the ‘Body’ of Christ

Francis Davis

Introduction

In this collection, we have explored the power of benefaction, ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor and notions of who might be responsible for the poor. As we have seen, these are contested terms, and in this essay, I want to suggest that they are today all the more contested and contestable. On the one hand, I will argue, this is because the social challenges and contexts which poor people face, and in which they find themselves, are now more complex than ever before, and what we know about the sources of those challenges is both more and less complete than ever before. On the other hand, I will propose, this is because that complexity provides immense challenges for the Christian paradigms by which we seek to discern modern needs and, indeed, may be confronting the Christian social tradition with challenges so demanding to some of its assumptions that it leaves it in a kind of analytical bind. And, of course, ‘today’ we know much more than we did ‘yesterday’ about how the Christian Church itself performs in these regards.

First, I will turn to aspects of how this may shape our interpretation and notions of ‘evidence’ and so authority. Second, I will tease out some of the problems we may face in the light of new patterns of complexity. Third, I will explore how these factors may impact our ideas of poverty by reference to a particular set of human issues and, finally, set out some research areas that seem to be a natural development of the book’s conversation.

Motivation, behaviour and ‘evidence’

When, in 2008, my *Moral But No Compass: Church, Government and the Future of Welfare* was published, it caused a storm.¹ The *Times* and *Sunday Times* led with coverage of its

¹ Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, *Moral But No Compass: Church, Government and the Future of Welfare* (Cambridge: Von Hugel Institute and Marple: Matthew James, 2008).

findings and the BBC TV News as well.² Over the next days, the publication was the subject of leaders in every major UK daily newspaper, scrutiny through op-eds and lectures and comment by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and parliamentary debate. It then began its gradual percolation into the cycles of academic citation and discussion. What was notable throughout this period was that while those in the policymaking community reacted pragmatically to the 'empirical evidence' we had gathered on Anglican volunteering, philanthropic cashflows, capacity, capabilities and institutional reach, a variety of strands within the churches reacted, instead, against what they perceived to be an implicit assumption the publication had made, namely, that 'data' trumped theology. We were also accused of falling foul of 'government's tendency to want to "make use" of the church whose role is actually not to "do" anything but to "be" prophetic'.³ One current senior Anglican bishop explains this as a reaction to a mirror being held up to the church's decision-making itself, but, either way, what was also conceivably at stake was an older dispute between the relative veracity – and authority – of the 'sacred' and 'social' sciences as intense as the one that Christians may have explored in more depth elsewhere, namely, that between 'science' and 'faith'.⁴

It is a repeated claim in modern English Christian discourse – especially that of evangelicals and some Catholics – that faith *motivates* social action. This elucidation of a continuum between religious conviction, an idea of responsibility and consequent behaviours is a constant theme in many fora and one that arises in parts of the papers in this collection. To question this linkage can attract furious Christian protest and accusations of being unbiblical and even 'lacking poetry'.⁵ Thus, while Joachim Jeremias, in his classic study, may have given us an ability to interpret Jerusalem at the time of Jesus through an economic and social lens,⁶ the challenge we face now is our ability to make sense of our present Christian claims in the context of the exponentially increasing scope of the social and political sciences. Disciplines such as geography, sociology which is rediscovering religion 'after' the secularization thesis, epidemiology

² E.g. Ruth Gledhill, 'Church Attacks Labour for Betraying Christians', *The Times*, 7 June 2008 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/church-attacks-labour-for-betraying-christians-vhnmkfhf859>, accessed March 2018); and Ruth Gledhill, 'Ignored and Spurned, the Church has lost its Faith in Government', *The Times*, 7 June 2008 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ignored-and-spurned-the-church-has-lost-its-faith-in-government-3qmhjqql06x>, accessed March 2018).

³ This was a challenge offered constructively by John Atherton when I gave the first Ronald Preston Lecture, outlining what would be in the report's findings at the University of Manchester (May 2010); and also the feedback of the head of public affairs of the Church of England to me, who, at a later public debate organized by the Church Urban Fund, suggested the arguments I made had a weakness of having 'no theology of sin' (Church Urban Fund/Diocesan Social Responsibility Officers' Conference, June 2010).

⁴ See, e.g., the work of the Faraday Institute (<http://www.faraday.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/>, accessed March 2018) and John Cornwell's activities (<https://science-human.org/>, accessed March 2018), both in the University of Cambridge; and also Nick Spencer, *Darwin and God* (London: SPCK, 2009).

⁵ I am thinking especially of Timothy Radcliffe, 'Relativising the Relativisers: A Theologian's Assessment of the Role of Sociological Explanation of Religious Phenomena and Theology Today', in *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict*, ed. David Martin, John Orme Mills and W. S. F. Pickering (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 165–77; Robin Gill, ed., *Theology and Sociology: A Reader*, new edn (London: Cassell, 1996); and also an intense exchange on choosing Nehemiah versus any other biblical book as a guide to the public sphere between the Jubilee Centre's Michael Schluter and the scholar and hermit Fr Thomas Cullinan (Epiphany Group, Prinknash Abbey, Jan 1990).

⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969).

and psychology offer insights today previously unavailable to the churches and their scriptural scholars. Collectively, they are as widely, if not more widely, read than academic theology, and together they form a body of knowledge more likely to shape the perceived decisions of firms, governments, anti-poverty agencies and even the accounting functions of the churches than 'theology' or 'faith' as such. This is not just a feature of secularity but a concrete question of confidence in interpretive power. It might just be, then, that the things we know now about societies leave biblical texts more at risk of being rooted to the spot of the spaces and places from which they arose and the Christian social tradition not much more distinctive than, in effect, risking aping whatever the social structures and government habits in which they find themselves happening to be – all while protesting forcibly its unique ability to 'motivate' in modern times.⁷ By avoiding the issue that Christian behaviour is conceivably indistinguishable from other behaviours, the Christian narrative weakens itself.

By way of example, in this context, the energetic turn in government, business and the academy to behavioural science, in general, and behavioural economics, in particular, seems to me to present evidence which begins to undermine much of the way Christians talk about poverty and public life. Behavioural economists contend that in contrast to linear relationships between ideas and behaviour, and *contra* rational choice theory of private choice or class preference – or, for that matter, 'faith' provoking or motivating 'action' – human decision-making and behaviours are the product of the intense aggregation of information conditioned by default perspectives on sources of trust, time, institution and (s)pace. Thus, famously, at Schipol airport in Amsterdam, exhortation to the common good, inspiration to higher social norms and incentivization applied to the problem of the cleanliness around male urinals of Amsterdam's busy airport had no observable impact on outcomes or choices of the male users of the facilities. Ultimately, the painting of an ergonomically placed fly upon the ceramics seemed strikingly to provoke just such a fundamental change in behaviour as male users were 'nudged' to direct fluid flows to points in the urinal which would maximize liquid capture and minimize cleaning costs round and about.⁸ In policy terms, this is the source of the current requirement, while applying for a UK driving licence, to declare an intention or otherwise to become an organ donor. In theological terms, the success of nudge in the face of the failure of so many other approaches is a kind of decimation of the claim that 'faith motivates' (and trumps other variables) alone while undermining a raft of enduring Christian strategies to inspire behaviour change.

⁷ See the special edition of *Public Money and Management* 29 (2006), ed. Francis Davis; and Francis Davis. 'The English Bishops, Caritas and "Civic Prophecy" after the 2010 Papal Visit', in *Catholic Social Conscience: Reflection and Action on Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Keith Chappell and Francis Davis, revised edn (Leominster: Gracewing, 2011), 129–45.

⁸ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009); Ben Chu, 'Father of "Nudge Theory" Richard Thaler wins 2017 Nobel Prize in Economics' *Independent*, 9 October 2017 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/richard-thaler-nobel-prize-in-economics-winner-2017-behavioural-economics-nudge-theory-a7990291.html>, accessed March 2018); the government Behavioural Insights Team website (<http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>, accessed March 2018); and the 2010 launch of a specialist and far-reaching programme at Warwick Business School (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/subjects/bsci/>, accessed March 2018).

Indeed, modelling that which did not work at Schipol airport, modern churches trail-blaze exhortation as a biblical norm for idea change leading to behaviour change – they call it preaching. Meanwhile, much economic analysis emerging from church headquarters regarding the ‘common good’ has a tendency to draw on classical economic frameworks even while claiming theological authority for new insights into human behaviour and flourishing.⁹ It happens with ‘fresh expressions’, too, when language about the need for intense spiritual conversion as the best next step for human flourishing is as often unreflectively combined with success criteria for evangelism uncritically adopted from the performance standards of trading institutions. One friend remarked to me recently that listening to the leaders of the pentecostal network Pioneer and the conservative Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth speak of outreach was like ‘sitting in a sales strategy meeting at work’.

What is at stake here is the very possibility and idea of ‘believing’ conversion leading to concrete action when aggregation, belonging and other factors may be greater shapers of what may be possible or proceed from ‘believing’. Evidencing ‘what really works’ is important, then, if benefaction, service and responsibility are to be concretely sustained, for ‘faith’ alone may tell us little. There is a risk in not doing such ground work in seeking to learn from our old history of service to, with and alongside the poor. It is that, in order to seek to make our prior models of analysis fit, we uncritically assume the traction of ideas, the agency of persons, the shaping of geographies, the relationality of choices or the presence of a grounded spirituality, where all those relationships have actually been split asunder by the complexity of contemporary society, by unnamed commodification and by behavioural insights that shred our pathways to authoritative insight. More work needs to be done here at the interface of the social, economic and political sciences, theology and the Bible, for it is likely that something is being lost to us ‘today’ that was available to us ‘yesterday’ and that some things available ‘today’ mean that old history and language are under pressure.

This difficult tension of discernment through religious eyes between the ‘is’ of the contemporary arena and the ‘ought’ of Scripture and tradition and our own narratives is helpfully exemplified in the encounter with the institutions, social forces and extreme complexity of step-change global urbanization. It is to this that I shall now turn.

Cities, complexity and urban bias

One of the great changes between the collation of the New Testament and the death of St Francis of Assisi was the emergence of the effervescing urban arena and its growth to large scale. And in the era between St Francis and the present ministry of Pope Francis, humanity became a majority urban species, and the first cities of more than ten million inhabitants came in to view. Most of us now live in cities. An increasing number of us

⁹ For extended discussion of this conundrum, see Davis ‘English Bishops’; Davis, Paulhaus and Bradstock, *Moral but No Compass*.

on every continent live in megacities, and, not least on mainland China, the size and number of cities continues to grow exponentially.

Modern cities as social constructs, of course, are absent from the Bible. Nor are they as clearly spatially and architecturally stratified as the first European ones that St Francis may have walked. Nor any longer can their conflagration of so many varying forces and populations easily have them located as beacons of modernity and so described as 'secular'.¹⁰ For modern cities can be suggested to live beyond the normal confines of time and space being simultaneously pre-modern, modern and post-modern: trading 24/7 they are the meeting points of diasporas, global supply chains, telecommunications and the arrival and dispersal of new DNA chains and diseases. They are the hiding points of the most traditional and radical interpretations of religious traditions. They are the outing points of the most liberal and unconstrained choices of lifestyle, sexual and gender preferences. They are the new agents of diplomacy whose hard and soft power outstrips some national governments subverting claims to sovereignty with which many of us have grown up, and upending hierarchies of decision-making with which, especially, episcopal denominations are comfortable.

If Jesus and Mary came looking for an inn in modern Karachi, its swirling scale might both offer sheep to slaughter from familiar pens cobbled together on the roadside in the traditional manner while requiring digital literacy and access to credit to lock down a room for the night.¹¹ Indeed, as refugees or travellers they might have had it harder still: while the international refugee support community is much designed around rural 'camps', the slums, streets and tiny apartments of urban centres are as likely to house those fleeing now as those settled. Politically, such economic reach and population concentration can trigger new political behaviours on the part of elites, behaviours which privilege the political accommodation of those 'virtually' present through financial and trading systems and bodily present, by proximity, at the expense of rural domains that cannot present such a threat (or source of revenue) to those elites. If, in response to tiny, or even unexpressed, personal preferences an incoming user of a website can encounter – without knowing – thousands of personalized points of change in their customer journey at a bank whose 'branch' is on the same road – whose data is in the cloud and whose technicians are abroad – without ever speaking with or meeting a person how do we see the embodiment of human community, family, home?

¹⁰ The classical study here is Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), which the author has revisited more recently: Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, new edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). See also 'Disability Inclusion', *The Ruderman Foundation* (<https://rudermanfoundation.org/programs/disability-inclusion/>, accessed March 2010).

¹¹ For the digitization of erstwhile offline services in Karachi, see the striking work of Seed Ventures (<http://seedventures.org/>, accessed March 2018). On a recent visit to Karachi, I was struck by the juxtaposition of livestock and high-tech dwellings, refugees and local ventures and discussed this with the Governor of Sindh at meetings hosted by Seed (<https://farazkhan.org/portfolio-items/meeting-with-governor-of-sindh-mohammad-zubair-today-with-our-keynote-speaker-of-the-future-summit-prof-francis-davis-uks-ministerial-adviser-on-inclusive-enterprise-professor-of-innovation-at-st/>, accessed March 2018).

Many issues, from the use of advanced digital strategies to shape urban life – in shorthand, termed ‘smart cities’ technology¹² – to the presence (or lack) of planning policy, to the function of architecture to the simultaneous concentration and dispersal of resources, to ‘who’ the poor are, ‘where’ they are and ‘how’ they might be ‘cared’ for, take on new dimensions as these spaces that are not physical places as we have known them. Indeed, they now are places which blend across time and space, spreading and developing their claims to ground the terrain on which humanity plants (or unhinges) itself.

Combined with the insights, trading opportunities and the traction of big and open data, these factors play out to leave the church under pressure once again as much as any other institution or community. For ‘yesterday’ Christ could share a language, geography, conversation, even with his oppressors, while today the urban age forces only fluidity into movement. Even if the church had committed to run with ‘evidence’ like that described above, it might, like others, find it impossible to gather it meaningfully.

This is unsurprising: the first urbanization of the medieval age eventually required the innovation of mendicant preaching sustained through new religious orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, so forcing a reshaping of the monastic structuring of the church on the urban outskirts and enabling that which was new to be really heard. Modern urbanization will require step changes in the form of mission as great, if not greater. For all the many Christian claims to ideas and motivation by believing, the institutions they create to embed those new efforts will be crucial.

Ideas, institutions and ‘relationality’

As lines are blurred and silos built up and complexity slides so many information and decision points away from personal view, a certain kind of ‘rigorous understanding’ recedes for ‘contingency’ is the new norm everywhere. As a result, a kind of uncertain panic emerges for some Christian leaders used to certainty, and, in response, I want to suggest that we repeatedly risk trying to bottle five-pint-size challenges in quart-size pots.

So, a pentecostal fellowship of 2,000 members may wish to ‘shed light’ on ‘the dark places of the city’, may seek to ‘transform relationality in our nation’ and ‘liberate the poor from the burden of debt’. Nevertheless, in response to these conceivably structural challenges found at complex scale, their first steps are all organized at a level they can touch and in a geography to which they can drive – namely, their own ‘congregation’. Even in the Catholic case, where the enormous Caritas federation of agencies sits alongside the official *ecclesia*, they do so organized at the ‘congregation’ level first – and one way of interpreting Pope Benedict’s approach to these bodies was to understand his key teaching letter on Catholic charity as much as an attempt to

¹² The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors discuss tech and ‘smart’ dimension cities at <http://www.rics.org/uk/knowledge/glossary/smart-cities/> (accessed March 2018); see also the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge (<https://www.smartercitieschallenge.org/>, accessed March 2018).

bring them under episcopal control at the micro level as to constrain actions at large scale.¹³ Indeed, in our debates surrounding one of the papers in the present collection, it was suggested by one interlocutor that to move beyond the congregational was to create a 'para-church' realm of institutions that would under-mine relationality and personal conversion.

I wonder here if a few things are going on which, in order to make good our solidarity with the weakest today, we need to work harder at surfacing.

First, it is not clear to me that the Christian defaults to shorthand ideas such as 'relationality' or the rhetorical device of 'the common good' offers any assistance in discerning our current context or future actions. Rather, it can simply shrink unfathomable complexity to comprehensible scale – to seemingly put the 'genie' back in the bottle, to make our theology cope again, not least by linking it to a metaphor of congregation. Thus, 'spiritual redemption' and congregationalism at the expense of community renewal and engaging at institutional scale is easier to handle, while also not challenging any ecclesiologies or patterns of power within and around the churches that have been carried forward from the past. Moreover, it is ironic, for, while it is grasped, controlled and brought to a 'relational' scale of insight, actions that are associated with it are often allocated with ever more energetic ideas and descriptions of meaning, purpose and spiritual significance. Thus, a church might claim to be 'remaking' a whole city in the light of Christ, while its city civic leadership thinks it simply opened a Free School for twenty and a community project with a turnover of about 0.000001 per cent of the local hospital, let alone the urban care system.

We have touched not only on behavioural economics already but also on the choices emanating from its insights as they encounter institutions and organizations that mediate religion, that shape culture, that unlock and mitigate social and spiritual impacts. We know that the 'same' Christian message preached by a pentecostal pastor has varying meanings in contexts as diverse as, say, the slums of Lusaka, the rural areas of the Zambian North and railtrack-side rallies in Livingstone on the Zimbabwe border. Intense financial centralization within the Mormons sheds a new light on 'local missions', while the third-world-ization of many Catholic religious orders and the South Americanization and Africanization of the US-centric Assemblies of God essentially mean the increasing capture by the Global South of Christian assets and institutions closely held for centuries in the Global North. Indeed, the 'same' Christian idea reaching the bureaucracy of Sierra Leone or Khartoum is not only *not* the same in its implications, but the actions that flow from it ought not to be the same as each other or those, say, in London or Dallas. Institutions – management – matters.

Further, of course, it is not only doing something at scale that is the answer. 'Relationality' and 'the common good' may be quick fixes of language that help us avoid tough policy and leadership decisions, but so is the shorthand reach for fashionable new 'liberations' being offered to the societies in which the church finds itself. Those facing female genital mutilation (FGM), human slavery and severe disability, for

¹³ This would be my response to Pope Benedict XVI, *On the Service of Charity* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20121111_caritas.html, accessed March 2018).

example, have had as hard a time gaining traction for their voice within the mainline churches as within mainstream society, even while the liberal West has been loosening the legal shackles on the freedoms to be enjoyed by women and gay people in general.

In short, the tendency towards the avoidance of hard-headed institutional assessments can leave the poor being presented as 'liberated' by 'relationality' or 'set free' by the common good but practically untouched, unaided or unmobilized as the shape, scale and form by which the church sets out to respond, and the locations in which it speaks, are inadvertently limited by that which went before or by that which is currently fashionable in wider culture.

This not only constrains the church's service and public engagement, but it also has devastating impacts on its own self-understanding. For what we know about the churches today is that they have struggled to bring the good news.

Mind, disability, poverty and the body of Christ

Nowhere is the mismatch between the capabilities of how we use Scripture, the context in which Jesus lived, the contingencies of today, the constraints in our assessment of need, the position of the poor and the risky tendency to weak institutional analysis better shown than when we turn to the huge swathe of humanity who live with disability and mental ill health: according to the World Health Organization, one in four of humanity will live with a mental illness in our lifetimes.¹⁴ An increasing number of us will experience post-partum, dementia- or trauma-related psychosis, in addition to those with environmental and genetic triggers. In total, about a billion people have disabilities, about 15 per cent of the globe's population, and, despite the weakness of some data, we know that many disabilities and conditions have global prevalence.

Christianity, of course, is a religion whose God had been disabled by trauma by the time he was lifted on to the cross. Subsequently pierced in the side and above the wrists with his legs probably broken, no matter what one Gospel says, he would have been laid in the tomb. Three short days later, he would have needed a wheelchair and a trauma counsellor were it not for the miracle of the resurrection. Those who had watched his demise were still in shock. Our God, by this account, is a disabled God and only 'deserved' those disabilities if we strangely accrue to Christ a power of 'choice' born of New Right political economy rather than biblical norms.¹⁵

This presents the Christian Church with some challenges. The last and present popes have only used the term 'schizophrenia' in relation to the human tendency to spiritual inconsistency and never in relation to the lived experience of psychosis. Across the Global South, draconian mental health laws – often inherited from colonial 'lunacy' legislation – which permit the sterilization and imprisonment of disabled women have been met with silence by church leaders while the failure of church hospitals

¹⁴ WHO, 'Mental Disorders Affect One in Four People' (http://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/, accessed March 2018).

¹⁵ This was the contention of Margaret Thatcher in her speech to the Church of Scotland General Assembly (21 May 1988) (<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>, accessed March 2018).

to consistently train nurses with mental health specialisms, psychiatrists and those seeking to specialize in disability are as marked as in any other community or service-providing contexts.

This is not surprising, as my researchers and I have been unable to find a single bishop of any denomination in the English-speaking world who was openly disabled on the day of appointment. In the wider church there are exceptions, with Joni Erikson Tada in evangelical circles and an eminent American Benedictine Abbot, but the omission in leadership becomes embedded across the church the further we look. Recently, I observed to an eminent Catholic canon lawyer that it struck me as a shame that the code of canon law had for many centuries found it difficult within its heart to permit those with disabilities to even *apply* to train for the priesthood. ‘Think’, I said, ‘of the squaddie whose hands have been bombed away in Afghanistan, who found God as part of his recovery and wants to serve as priest.’ The response from this totally compassionate person was that ‘it was obvious, because without hands there was no way you’d be making the consecration [of the bread and wine at Mass]’. The body of Christ, it seems, is and ought to be as beautiful as the magazine covers it often decries as representing a decadent culture. Worse still, it is statistically more likely than almost any other institution and indeed even more likely than the secular world to exclude disabled people and those with mental ill health from its pathways of decision-making and ministry. Legal challenges to Gurdwaras alleging discrimination, and the heavy lifting which Boston’s Ruderman Foundation has had to do to reshape Jewish attitudes to disability,¹⁶ suggest that might be a wider religious problem too. This is especially so when a growing number of those who are disabled have been saved from termination by mothers resisting cultural norms and by medical advances that permit birth at an earlier phase of gestation, but with likely complications in the long term. In this context, this gulf in awareness and discourse is all the more striking in those denominations who speak of disability rights in the womb as part of pro-life political strategies.

The conundrum here may be one that touches on a wider question that we might wish to explore as we build on the papers in the present collection, namely, the question of how much agency the excluded have, whether the Church is open to reshaping and repurposing itself in the light of their experience and what the consequences might be for practical and other responses with the shifted paradigm of knowledge and insights that co-creation might unlock. Pentecostal and charismatic Catholic and other mainstream Christian responses to disability are only rarely in the realm of rights but are most often associated with pity, healing and subject status. Catholic dioceses speak of the ‘sick and the disabled’, pastoral letters on disability focus on care, not empowerment, and the language, habits and symbols of pilgrimage – especially to seek ‘cures’ – have ambiguous and possibly pernicious impacts on the ability of those made in the image of the disabled God to seize the significance of the potential in their own resurrection. With disability and severe mental ill health, we seem to be encountering

¹⁶ ‘UK Gurdwara Sued over Discrimination against Disabled’, *Daily News and Analysis* website (<http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-uk-gurdwara-sued-over-discrimination-against-disabled-2074664>, accessed March 2018); more broadly, see The Ruderman Foundation (<http://rudermanfoundation.org/>, accessed March 2018).

a profound systemic failure of Christian insight, and what goes with it is a deep and implicit assumption of a lack of agency on the part of disabled people which might in turn name this as a fundamental failing in our whole approach to benefaction, responsibility and service today and yesterday.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I have sought to respond to the rest of the collection and our conversations in a manner which would provoke conversation and further enquiry. I wondered, first, if the renewal of the social sciences now gives us more insight into human behaviour and choices than ever before and so runs the risk of relativizing the veracity of some of the claims that churches are in the habit of making about themselves and the society around them. This line of enquiry seems particularly significant if one turns to the intense complexity and morphing of traditional conceptions of many theological and other categories of enquiry that emerge from examining the majority urban world in which we now all live. The gap I suggested might be to relink, or properly disaggregate, religious ideas, other ideas, institutions and social practice, for without close attention to such detail, Christians risk mixing their rhetorical metaphors with the actual scale and reach of the institutions that they put to work. Finally, I set out how the unspoken, un-mobilized and uncared for swathe of humanity living with disabilities and severe mental ill health may be an exemplar case of the kinds of 'poverty' that become excluded from the language and the body of Christ when social analysis, organizations and social change are not combined.

Between today and yesterday is like a million years. Indeed, but the collection here points not only to the fruitfulness of the conversations we have had but also to the urgency of the work that remains to be done.